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Dubbink, Joep

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# ‘Don’t Stop Me Now!’ – Exod 32:10 and YHWH’s Intention to Destroy His Own People

Joep Dubbink

## Introduction

In this paper, I will discuss a couple of verses from Exodus 32 that have fascinated me for a long time. The reason for that fascination is particularly found in Exod 32:10, where YHWH says to Moses:

Now therefore	וְעַתָּה
let me alone,	הִנֵּיחָה לִי
that my wrath may burn hot against them	וַיַּחַר־אַפִּי בָהֶם
and I may consume them,	וְאָחֳלֵם
in order that I may make a great nation of you.	וְאַעֲשֶׂה אוֹתָךְ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל
(ESV)	

‘Them’ in the third line are the Israelites at the foot of the mountain who have made for themselves a Golden Calf. Moses does not obey this order, but does exactly the opposite and succeeds in calming the furious Deity and securing a future for his people. What we are witnessing here is a very peculiar interaction between YHWH and his most dear servant. But what is going on here? What might have been the intentions of the author of this extraordinary piece of literature, and what is the biblical theological outcome when we are dealing with violence in the Bible and a violent God?

## On Exodus 32–34

The three chapters of the Golden Calf narrative, Exodus 32–34, rather crudely interrupt the course of events told in the previous and following chapters (24–31 and 35–40) dealing with the instructions for building a portable desert temple, and the effectuation of these instructions. The sign for the fact that they form an insertion is that the instructions about the Sabbath in 31:12–17 seem to continue just after the episode of the Golden Calf, in 35:1–3. Moreover, in 35:4 Moses asks the people for gifts of various materials, starting with *gold* – as if there would be any gold left in the possession of the Israelites, who had according to 32:3 spent all their gold on the making of the Golden Calf.

Discussing the structure of this part of the Book of Exodus is far beyond the scope of this paper. Even the episode of Exodus 32–34 as a relatively isolated unit still offers plenty of challenges.

First, there are the literary-historical questions. For our purpose, we can safely leave aside the various attempts in this respect.<sup>1</sup> We must, however, address the fact that many exegetes regard Exodus 32:7–14, YHWH's discussion with Moses, as a later addition, showing rather strong signs of Deuteronomic theology, just like the discussion between Moses and Aaron in 32:21–24. There is indeed tension between the fact that Moses on the mountain hears, directly from YHWH, that his people have sinned (32:7–8), but later on seems to be surprised by the situation he encounters when he has descended from the mountain, resulting in him shattering the two tablets and destroying the Calf thoroughly (32:15–20).<sup>2</sup> A clever psychological explanation – knowing a Golden Calf has been made is quite different from experiencing the unholy feast around the Calf first-hand!<sup>3</sup> – cannot disguise the fact that there is probably a seam between these two parts, showing their different provenance. On the other hand, 32:7–14 belongs to the heart of the story as we know it now, and I side with Brevard Childs, who concludes that it should be treated as an integral part of the composition.<sup>4</sup>

We must also consider briefly the connection between this Golden Calf and the *two* calves that king Jeroboam erected at Bethel, according to 1 Kings 12:25–32. Almost no one denies that there must be some relation, and most commentators suppose a literary dependency, shown, for example, by the almost exact parallel between Exodus 32:4 and 1 Kings 12:28:

הִנֵּה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלֹךְ מִמִּצְרַיִם  
(‘these are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt’)

Especially the plural is striking and constitutes a strong parallel.<sup>5</sup> Most traditional commentators see Jeroboam stupidly repeating the ‘sin of the fathers’, while most non-traditional scholars suppose that the report of Jeroboam’s two calves is primary, and the story of the Calf in Exodus is retrojected in time.<sup>6</sup> In my opinion,

<sup>1</sup> Papers like that of Lehming 1960, starting with ‘Über die Quellenscheidung in Ex. xxxii gibt es keine einheitliche Auffassung’ and ending with a table containing a new proposal of the division of verses over the presumed literary sources, are not often written anymore. Still, most commentaries give a summary and take a stand, but it seldom helps to solve the problems of the chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Burning *and* grinding (32:20), which not so much requires a technical explanation (the Calf was made of wood, covered by gold, the wood was burned, the gold grinded; so, for example, Cassuto 1967, 412, 419) but it should be regarded as a complete annihilation: Houtman 2000, 660.

<sup>3</sup> Ellington 2005, 52.

<sup>4</sup> Childs 1974, 567–569.

<sup>5</sup> אֱלֹהֵיךְ can of course be either singular or plural, but the verb הֶעֱלֹךְ shows it should be read as a plural. Some translations remove the plural in the Exodus narrative, e.g., ASV and the Dutch translations NBG51, WV, and NBV.

<sup>6</sup> Bulka, a traditional Jewish scholar, postulates there were indeed two calves in the desert: the golden one Aaron made and a living calf. Taking Aaron’s report in Exod 32:24 literally, he suspects that among the עַרְבֵי רֵב, the ‘mixed multitude’ that was travelling with the Israelites, there were also Egyptian wizards (Exod 12:38) who somehow managed to let a living calf emerge from the fire. A clever solution, but problematic

the parallel with 1 Kings 12 gives ample reason to regard the occurrence of the Golden Calf in Exodus as a *story*, not a report of events. That is important for what follows.

Also for those who are from the beginning inclined to a more synchronic, narrative approach of the story, some challenges arise. Looking at the beginning of the episode, the most problematic aspect is the role of Aaron. He takes an active part in the construction of the Calf, which is amazing because YHWH regards this as a great sin. Aaron seems to have been manipulated by the people, and his explanation in 32:21–24 is not very strong: 'it just happened'. But after being questioned by his brother, he is not even rebuked for this transgression. He survives the following ordeal by the Levites (32:26–29) and goes on later to be the High Priest as if nothing had happened.

Equally strange is the role of Moses in the story as a whole. On the mountain, he fiercely stands up for his people, saving them from destruction, but having returned to the camp he not only rebukes them and destroys the Calf, but also urges the Levites to inflict a bloody punishment on the people. At the end of the chapter he is again pleading on behalf of his people (32:30–34).

These observations serve as a warning to be careful, and not to jump to conclusions too early. But for our purpose, we can leave most other literary and historical questions aside, and concentrate on the one matter that seems to be central:

*What is at stake here?*

*What does the calf signify and what exactly is the sin of the people?*

The many solutions proposed, with many nuances, can roughly be divided into two groups:<sup>7</sup>

1. This is plain apostasy, leaving YHWH and trading him in for another god or gods.
2. The Golden Calf is meant as a representation for YHWH, which the people felt they needed as a reassurance while Moses was absent.

Both options raise other problems. If the intention of the people is to leave YHWH, it is hard to imagine how the story could have let Aaron help with that process without incurring serious repercussions. It is Aaron who calls the impending feast a חַג לַיהוָה (v. 5), which is according to many exegetes, an attempt to save the situation and avoid the grave sin of apostasy, but things ran out of hand.<sup>8</sup> On the

because the living calf is never mentioned in the story anymore. Besides, his explanation mainly blames the foreigners. Bulka 2009, 253.

<sup>7</sup> I leave aside all speculations about the possible Egyptian or Canaanite background of the Calf, a connection to the story of the sin with Baal of Peor (Num 25) and a possible legitimate sanctuary at Bethel where an image of a bull might have functioned as a pedestal, just like the ark with the cherubim in Jerusalem. See Houtman 2000, 619–629, and Dohmen 2004, 296–303. For curiosity's sake, I mention the suggestion that the calf would represent the absent Moses, and that the radiating, or 'horned' face (קַרְן אֹזֶר פָּנָיו) of Moses after his second return (Exod 34:29) would refer to the horns of the Calf. Cf. Herring 2012, 65.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Jacob 1992, 941; Dohmen 2004, 298. Cassuto 1967, 413, 420, is remarkable in his attempt to exonerate Aaron completely; for Houtman, Aaron's position is

other hand, if the Calf would have been meant as a representation of YHWH, we are ‘only’ looking at a transgression of the second commandment, the prohibition of worshipping any object made by hands. In that case, the punishment the Levites hand out, killing about 3000 of their fellow-Israelites (32:26–29), is rather harsh and doesn’t fit the crime very well.

If the story were to consist of various layers with a different opinion on this matter, some of them trying to exculpate Aaron more than the others do, the situation could be even more complicated. Readers of the final version, as we are, have to go by the interpretation offered by YHWH himself, that making this Calf is a severe sin and is, by Him, regarded as idolatry and apostasy (32:7–8).<sup>9</sup>

Apparently, the commandments are inseparable: by transgressing the prohibition of bowing to an idol, even if it is meant as a representation of YHWH, Israel has *de facto* left their God.

This means that, whatever innocent intentions there may or may not have been, like the making of some kind of symbol,<sup>10</sup> the text as we read it offers only one possible interpretation. Only then we can understand verses 10 and 11, because in these verses an even more cruel punishment is proposed by YHWH: the complete annihilation of the people of Israel, and starting anew with the descendants of Moses, as if he were to be a new Abraham.

### Exodus 32:10–14 in close-up

The expression *לֹא תַעֲבֹרָה לִי* in v. 10 must mean something like ‘leave me alone, don’t stand in the way of what I’m going to do now’.<sup>11</sup> There is not much discussion about the plain meaning of the text: Targum Onqelos offers the interpretation ‘refrain from prayer’ (בַּעַז), an injunction we could compare to the order given to Jeremiah: ‘do not pray for the welfare of this people’ (Jer 14:11). The plan of God is, actually, to destroy the people. The ‘burning anger’ (אֵתֶר־אֵפֶס) can still be envisaged in different ways, but כָּלָה (pi.), ‘to finish, to consume, to destroy’ doesn’t leave much room for the survival of any Israelite. If there were any remaining doubt about God’s intentions, then the last part of verse 10 makes everything

questionable: is he a culprit or a victim? He also notes that the idea of a ‘feast for YHWH’ is completely absent in the account YHWH himself offers in vv. 7–10; Houtman 2000, 611, 614, 618, 620, 645.

<sup>9</sup> Houtman 1996, 608; Dohmen 2004, 303.

<sup>10</sup> Jacob 1992, 937–943 goes to great lengths to exculpate the future High Priest. In his opinion, Aaron’s original intention was only to make ‘some symbol [for use] at the head of the line of the march’ (937), and he even holds that in 32:8 YHWH only accuses his people of ‘an improper mode of worship’ (943). But how would that explain a plan leading to their annihilation?

<sup>11</sup> The expression *נָח* (hif.) + *ל* occurs 24 times in the Hebrew Bible and varies in scope. While most texts refer to the gift of the land or having rest from enemies, the meaning ‘leave alone, leave in peace’ is found several times: 2 Ki. 23:18 ‘leave in peace’ (the bones of a corpse); Hos. 4:17 ‘let them’. In 1 Chr. 16:21 the text clearly has the connotation ‘to allow’.

crystal clear: YHWH wants to start all over again, with Moses, and make *him* the father of a גִּבּוֹרִים, a great people. Apparently, the Israelites, as they are, are in the eyes of God not so great: he is fed up with them and wants to make a completely new start.

Moses doesn't listen to this commandment but comes up with a clever array of three arguments, compelling YHWH to change his plans, and refrain from his destructive plans.

The three arguments given by Moses can be summarised as follows.

1. *Effectivity*. YHWH has already taken so much trouble to bring the people this far that it would really be a waste of effort to give up on them now.
2. *Public relations*. In case YHWH would let the Israelites die in the desert, the Egyptians would learn of this and regard the God of Israel as an evil deity, who had led his people out of Egypt with malicious intent.
3. *Contractual obligations*, or, in a more traditional formulation, *the covenant*. God has made promises to the patriarchs and he cannot cancel these without notice. There is a 'Jewish' and a 'Christian' view on this, the first focussing on the merits of the patriarchs, the second stressing the free grace of God.<sup>12</sup>

These arguments are interesting, and as often noticed they have close parallels in Numbers 14:13–19, with slight variations.<sup>13</sup> This is the way Moses confronts YHWH, boldly and without any hesitation.<sup>14</sup>

### The 'classical approach'

The discussion between Moses and YHWH raises a lot of questions when you look at it from a systematic theological point of view. Apparently, Moses is offered insight into what God is going to do, but he intervenes and these plans take a different course. In traditional theology, the problem is clear. When God is a perfect being, having complete knowledge of all future events, we cannot accept that his plans are changed by Moses' argumentation, or even that he in his argumentation

<sup>12</sup> For example, Cassuto 1967, 416, respectively Childs 1974, 568, and Houtman 2000, 651. 'Jewish' and 'Christian' are put in inverted commas because there are exceptions. The Jewish commentator Jacob 1992, 946, does not stress the merits of the fathers, while Houtman mentions Hahn, who does. On the differences between both approaches, see also Tiemeyer 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Whybray 1996, 116. One of the variations is that in Num 14:16 Moses is not afraid that God will be seen as malevolent, but as impotent: 'the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give to them...' Moreover, he fears that the Egyptians will spread this rumour to other peoples (Num 14:14).

<sup>14</sup> In the discussion of the first draft of this paper, Dr. Petr Sláma pointed to an even bolder statement in Exod 32:32, where Moses proposes that if YHWH was not prepared to pardon the Israelites, He should blot him, Moses, out of 'the book you have written': a character in the story revolting against the 'Author', YHWH, who is ultimately responsible for the story as a whole. Many thanks to him for this observation.

tells God something that He doesn't know already.<sup>15</sup> The only way out is to suppose that this verse is part of a carefully designed divine plan. By his utterance in v. 10, God *invited* Moses to intercede on behalf of his people.<sup>16</sup> This would be in line with the way YHWH operated when he shared his intentions to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah with Abraham, inviting him to intercede on behalf of these evil cities (Gen 18:16–21). Moses does indeed as he is expected to do: he intercedes, and after doing so God not so much changed his plan but executed what he had planned from the beginning, which was to rebuke his people, to punish them, but to continue with them.<sup>17</sup>

Is the problem solved? Not completely. In this explanation, verse 14 offers a new problem, depending on the translation of the verb נִחַם (nif.): is a strong 'repent' meant, or a much weaker 'have mercy'?<sup>18</sup> It is important to observe that traditional exegetes necessarily have to play down the strength of this verb, because a real change in God's plans is not compatible with their theology.

God is not limited in his knowledge, as well as capricious, and subject to uncontrollable fits of anger that lead him into errors. Besides being omniscient, God is fully in control of himself (to speak anthropomorphically) and all situations. He is consistently holy, just, and righteous in his thoughts, words, and actions.<sup>19</sup>

That alone might raise suspicions about their interpretation. Why is God taking this path? Some think this is to show the seriousness of the sin; others regard this as a test for Moses, comparable with the testing of Abraham in Genesis 22,<sup>20</sup> but, regardless of this, the outcome is known in advance by YHWH.

This explanation of course did not remain unchallenged. Many exegetes offered counterarguments, but all struggled with the effectivity of Moses' prayer or intercession. Is God really moved by this argumentation, and why? Does Moses provide him with new information? Most commentators tend to deny this, but then, what is the point of intercession?

<sup>15</sup> Master 2002, 593.

<sup>16</sup> Widmer 2004, 95, speaks of a 'long Jewish and Christian tradition which suggests that YHWH's command to be left alone paradoxically contains an invitation to intercede for his people'.

<sup>17</sup> This type of exegesis is found in many commentaries through the ages. I follow mainly the fairly recent, lucid formulation by Maier 2004, 137–143.

<sup>18</sup> Most translations have 'repent' (AV, ASV, German Lutherbibel, REB, Dutch SV, NBG'51), 'changed his mind' (NRSV) or the slightly weaker 'relented' (ESV, NIV, Dutch WV, NBV). A lot of work has been done on this verb, for example, the recent dissertation by Jan-Dirk Döhling, *Der bewegliche Gott: eine Untersuchung des Motivs der Reue Gottes in der hebräischen Bibel* (Herders biblische Studien 61), Freiburg: Herder, 2009, unfortunately not available in the Netherlands. For our purpose the context gives enough information. 'Have mercy' is not within the scope of the verb, but in this way already the LXX (ἰλάσθῃ) apparently removed the offensive expression.

<sup>19</sup> Maier 2004, 138.

<sup>20</sup> Maier 2004, 140.

## **'Traditional' versus 'open' theism**

Being this far in my investigation, I struck upon a controversy in the Evangelical Movement in the United States I was not aware of: the struggle between 'traditional' and 'open' theism.

In 2001, the Evangelical Theological Society renounced 'open theism' by a large majority, although in a 2003 vote they didn't revoke the membership of those still advocating this type of theology.<sup>21</sup>

The adherents of 'open theism' believe that God's knowledge of the future is not complete, and that this is not a matter of God being imperfect, but of the future being, at least partly, open. They advocate free will, and if God really reckons with people as free agents, the future is necessarily open, so his actions depend on what people do.

This is important for us, because Exodus 32 played a major role in the debate, and a number of papers have been written on this chapter with this issue in mind.<sup>22</sup> It is not my intention to open a debate on the matter of theism, be it open or traditional. It is an illustration of the way the exegetical debate is important for systematic theology, but at the same time it shows how the debate is immediately *captured* by systematic theologians: the exegetes, 'free agents' as they may be, all come to conclusions about Exodus 32 that miraculously match with their religious opinions on matters of open or not-so-open theism.

## **A new approach**

It is difficult to choose between these two main routes of explaining the text. Who could pretend to be above such an ideological debate? As far as the contributors to the 'theism debate' are concerned, I feel that both sides are concentrating too much on one another instead of on the text. They try to defend their explanation of the text, while at the same time trying to maintain a systematic theological stance that is more or less acceptable for the other party. That is complicating the exegetical debate in an unacceptable way. It is of course especially obvious for some of the 'open theists'. They want to be accepted as orthodox Christians, be it with their own slightly changed paradigm, but this attempt hampers any free interaction with the text. Both traditional and more modern exegetes, whether or not they call themselves theists of any sort, and whether or not they take part in the debate mentioned, treat the text in Ex 32 as giving direct information about *their* God in an ontological way.<sup>23</sup> That easily leads to biased exegesis.

In the end, we can of course pose ourselves the question of whether we can accept, for our own belief system, the contribution of this text by this author. But, first and foremost, exegetes must read the text and let it say what it says, welcome or not.

<sup>21</sup> Maier 2004, 127, note 2.

<sup>22</sup> Master 2002; Maier 2004; Ellington 2005.

<sup>23</sup> The paper of this volume by John Barton comprises an excellent discussion of this issue.



I'm trying to do that again, and I call it somewhat boldly a 'radical exegetical approach'.

### My contribution

For a start, I want to challenge the one conviction that both sides share, viz. that in Exodus 32:10 YHWH *invites* Moses to intercede. Both Jewish and Christian exegesis almost always starts from this point, drawing attention to the parallel with Abraham in Genesis 18. Now I *do* accept the parallel between Abraham and Moses as intercessors, but this does not necessarily mean that God invites Moses to intervene. In the case of Abraham, the implicit invitation to intercede is derived from the fact that Abraham is informed about God's plans regarding Sodom. The proof is in the text. In Moses' case it isn't, and we shouldn't take it for granted.<sup>24</sup>

I must admit that I almost fell into this trap myself; the preliminary title of this paper was 'Don't (or do!) stop me now!'. But I found myself compelled to drop the 'or do!' in which I concurred with most current exegetes, because I don't believe that anymore.

In my opinion, *in the story* the plan of YHWH is really to start anew with the 'Mosites' as his chosen people instead of the Israelites, with Moses as the new patriarch. To accept this – and now we finally approach the theme of this volume – we must accept that YHWH, as the Torah presents him, is a very complicated, very ambiguous, and potentially very violent God.<sup>25</sup>

At this point, the important study of Michael Widmer deserves attention. He acknowledges that on the surface Moses goes against the direct order of YHWH *not* to intervene; taking v. 10 as an invitation to intercede, as part of a larger plan, would not be in agreement with the 'change of plans' in v. 14. Nevertheless, he stipulates that *on a deeper level*, Moses concurs with the intention of YHWH. His argumentation complicates the discussion even more, and it is questionable if that is necessary. His main witness is Psalm 106:23:

Therefore he said he would destroy them –  
had not Moses, his chosen one,  
stood in the breach before him,  
to turn away his wrath from destroying them. (NRSV)<sup>26</sup>

This text however seems rather to indicate that only Moses stood between the people of Israel and the ferocious Deity planning their destruction.

It is not accidental, that in this same section of Exodus we find the self-proclamation of YHWH in the famous thirteen attributes (Exod 34:6–7): 'a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger...' Exactly that was at stake at the beginning

<sup>24</sup> Against, for example, Meyers 2005, 259.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Whybray 1996, 119: 'The compiler evidently felt it to be an essential part of the total picture of Israel's origins, however theologically incongruous it may have seemed to him to be.'

<sup>26</sup> Widmer 2004, 101–106.

of chapter 32: God was perhaps אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם 'slow to anger',<sup>27</sup> but he did not particularly show that in verse 10, where his anger (אַף) was kindled rather quickly and in a frightening way. And he pronounces himself as 'abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' (רַב־חֶסֶד וְאֱמֻנָה) but in his destructive plan he doesn't live up to that. Widmer rightfully states that Moses is only asking God to be consistent and true to his promises,<sup>28</sup> but he stops short of asking the final question: *Why does YHWH need Moses?* It is after all only Moses who, with his lucid argumentation, brings YHWH 'back on track' so that at the end of the section, the attributes are indeed a valid testimony about him.<sup>29</sup> Why did the author(s) of these chapters present us with this picture of his/their God?

We must make an educated guess here, because the biblical authors almost never give explicit insight in their motives other than in the stories themselves. But in my opinion there can be only one answer: *this is the way they experienced their God.*

When you live in a world where many things are not going the way you want, where you are confronted with violence, evil from others, even from those you trust, and even you yourself aren't as trustworthy as you would like, then you have several options.

– You can leave the question open, put it away for a while. This is done in many biblical stories: the question 'is this fair, and what about God?' is often passed by. The biblical world is not a world in which everything rhymes, and often that is just accepted as it is.

– But in some cases, that won't do; the injustice is simply too striking, you have to find an explanation, or at least take a stand.

– You can blame it on yourself, regarding everything that happens as deserved, be it reward or punishment. This 'submissive' attitude is observed in many religions, and you can also find it in the Hebrew Bible, in some Psalms of Repentance for example. This attitude can develop into a mature spiritual attitude, but sometimes it just isn't enough.

– Remember that the option that *we* as Post-Enlightenment readers have, the liberal theological one that takes God out of the equation altogether, while blaming everything just on human behaviour or bad luck, was not available for biblical men and women. Their God was too encompassing, too omnipresent, to simply disregard his existence.

<sup>27</sup> Brueggemann 1997 and 2005, 216 explains this expression as 'with long nostrils, apparently to cool down his anger'.

<sup>28</sup> Widmer 2004, 122, displays a tendency to fit it all together and is keen to observe a 'deeper consistency or, to use the biblical language, faithfulness to the way God is and does'.

<sup>29</sup> The Talmud is very close to this, in my opinion: 'Rabbi Abbahu said: Were it not explicitly written, it would be impossible to say such a thing. This teaches that Moses took hold of the Holy One, blessed be He, like a man who seizes his fellow man by his garment and said before Him: Sovereign of the Universe, I will not let go of You until you forgive and pardon them'. Ber 32a, quoted by Tiemeyer 2007, 204, cf. Widmer 2004, 97.

– What is left then, is entering the discussion, criticising God, arguing with him, and confronting him with the undesired side-effects of his plans that he (indeed!) may have overlooked, reminding him of his promises he apparently has forgotten (!) – in short, to do all the things that Moses does in this story.

In these last lines, a picture of God appears that is not compatible at all with many aspects of Christian theology as it has developed in history. But it is my firm conviction that this is the way our story talks about YHWH. What I see is that many theologians are starting to defend God before they have even begun to read the story. ‘Of course, God is not capricious or whimsical, nor extraordinarily violent, and of course he does not need Moses to remind him of the covenant.’ That can be your conviction or belief, but that is not the way to start exegesis. The exegete reads that Moses *does* remind God of his covenantal obligations and *does* confront him with the disastrous consequences his actions would have – for Himself, for YHWH, because Moses is clever enough to know that a direct appeal for mercy on behalf of this unfaithful people would not be wise at this moment.

What Moses does is remarkably close to the way we would try to calm down an angry human being that is out of his mind. Why on earth would anyone write down such a fantastic – in all senses of the word – text, if we shouldn’t take it at face value? But apparently, reading the text this way requires a theological courage that not many can produce. Among one of the few that do is certainly Walter Brueggemann, who readily admits that YHWH has a difficult character.<sup>30</sup>

One last point. Many authors stress the fact that not every person is qualified to enter into this type of conversation: Abraham, Moses, David in one instance (2 Sam 24),<sup>31</sup> Job, they are the ones that dare speak to YHWH in such a bold way. There is truth in that observation: it is certainly no coincidence that the next chapter stipulates ‘that YHWH used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend’ (33:11). That would reduce this bold behaviour to an incident, something only God’s intimate friends could afford, not mortals like us.

But then, could it also be the other way around: could we say that *because* Moses – the Moses of the story of course, to point that out once again – is engaging in the debate with YHWH so undauntedly, he is all the more recognised as a special ‘personal friend’? In that case, his behaviour would not just be an incident, not even an important intervention at a critical moment of Israel’s history, but also a possible model for dealing with YHWH in his most unpleasant mood.

<sup>30</sup> Brueggemann 1997 and 2005 discusses at length the contradictory nouns that are used to describe YHWH’s character. He calls Him ‘uncompromising’ (290) and ‘indomitable’ (292) and even dares to connect the violence and danger that are intrinsic to his character with ‘something like the ominous, brooding music of the film *The Godfather*’ (249). He concludes: ‘Israel must learn to live with the problematic character of Yahweh’ (311).

<sup>31</sup> For David, see the paper by Viktor Ber, who rightly compares 2 Sam 24 with Exod 32: Ber 2015, especially 144f.